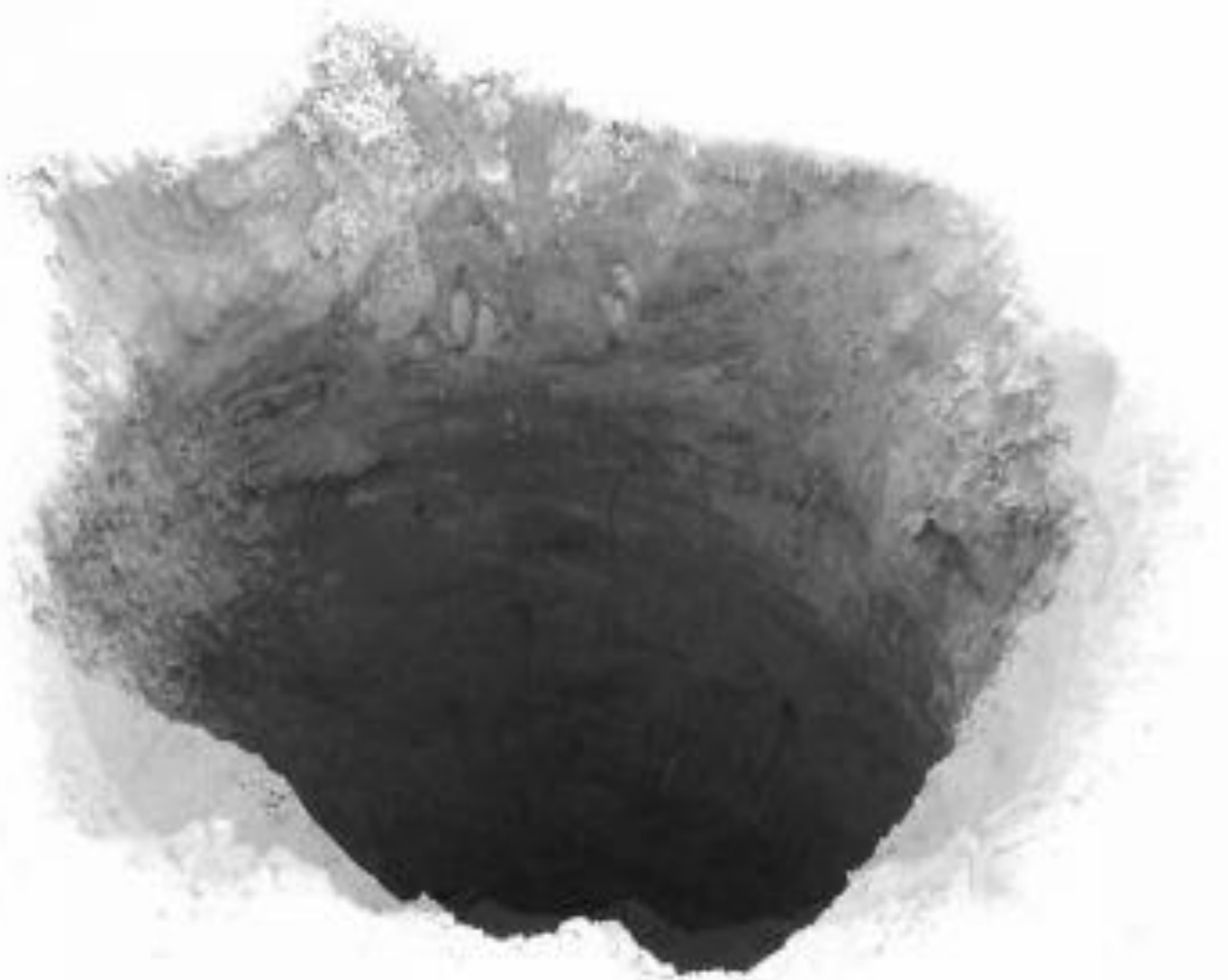


Shitopia

Bella Gaudin

SHIITOPIA

By Belle Grooves



For Sol, the person who helped me begin.

Title Page

Dedication

Contents

1. The Darkest Secret of Shiitopia
2. The Beginnings of Shiitopia
3. The Aftermath of Shiitopia's Beginnings
4. The Great War of Shiitopia
5. The Portals of Shiitopia
6. The Forbidden Gems of Shiitopia
7. The Lost Lands of Shiitopia
8. The Shadows of Shiitopia
9. The Pits of Shiitopia
10. The Beginning of the Rescue
11. The Beginning of the End
12. The Final Step

The Darkest Secret of Shiitopia

Centuries ago, the kings of Shiitopia were young, unknowing. They were not prepared for the chaos that came. The dark depths of the kingdom that rose from their dwelling. Nihar had finally escaped his prison. He finally had a chance to rule his own world. But two of the kings would never let such a thing happen to their people. Dilshad and Asteron formulated a strategy.

The people, of course, knew nothing of this plot. They stampeded the children and screamed as Nihar enveloped the sun with inky darkness. Every king except the two brothers ran and hid. When Nihar had nearly smothered all of Shiitopia with darkness, Asteron and Dilshad came forth with the Forbidden Gems: Abaddon the Orange, Adira the Purple, Galina the Yellow, and Raziel–Raziel the Blue. These gems, with the magic combined, were the one thing that had a chance at stopping Nihar. The brothers raised them high and together they cast the spell. The spell which only kings were worthy of casting. The spell which sent Nihar back to the depths.

The sun reemerged with the people's joy. Dilshad and Asteron were exalted upon the villagers' shoulders. Peace was restored at last. The Shiitopians were happy and carefree once more. Until Asteron took a turn for the worse...

The Beginnings of Shiitopia

One decade later, the people were still joyous. The fairies and elves of all kinds were free once more. The people lived in harmony with the kings, with Asteron and Dilshad. Once upon a time, the brothers had been close. They had ruled Shinzu as one. They had protected their people. That is, until one horrendous day.

Asteron grew distant from his little brother. He wanted to rule his own kingdom. Have his own power. His own people. He hated the easy-going life that Dilshad went on about. Every. Single. Day. Unfortunately, when this news made it to Dilshad, he was saddened by his brother's decision. They argued for days, not realizing that their anger was causing them to inadvertently use magic. Cracks appeared here and there each time a hand flew up in rage. Each time a fist was clenched. Finally, the land could not handle it. It shattered like glass hit with a hammer. The villages flew far off and were presumed to be lost. Shinzu was the people's last hope, but the brothers were destroying that as well.

Asteron became annoyed with his brother's persistent begging

and ended the argument. He abandoned Dilshad and his former village. He abandoned the peace he once had, simply for a dark castle called Zuba. The brothers, once close like twins, did not speak to each other for a year. On the first day of the next year, the beginning of war was declared.

The Aftermath of Shiitopia's Beginnings

Asteron had gathered every servant he needed to fight the battle for him. His plan would soon be put to use. Dilshad was well prepared with guards at every castle gate. He wanted to prevent his brother from decimating what they had both worked so hard to defend. Yet he sensed, in the back of his mind, that nothing would be enough to stop his brother from reigning over Shinzu.

When Asteron's men approached, Dilshad tasted bitterness in the air. He faced his army with a raised sword and yelled, "They approach, men! Ready your weapons and await my command! Have courage soldiers! Today, we must persevere!"

The steps of a hundred men echoed across the castle's pathway. They became louder and louder and louder... until there was only silence. Two brothers saw each other face to face. Eye to eye. Asteron was angry, but Dilshad was disappointed.

"Order your men to move or I'll have no choice except to move them myself." Asteron whispered harshly.

"There does not have to be a war, brother. We can talk about this. All of this nonsense can cease with a single command." Dilshad replied in a controlled tone.

Asteron dropped a hand, and his soldiers lowered their weapons. His brother followed suit with only a slight hesitation. Asteron strode closer to Dilshad, less than a foot away. There was only the sound of wind. Of raspy breaths. The breath of wind and of soldiers. They simply stood there for what seemed like hours.

"What is it that you insist we speak of?" Asteron inquired, shattering the delicate silence.

"The war. We do not have to fight. We don't have to make this something it is not. Do you not wish it could be like old times? The two of us were happy. The two of us could be brothers once more."

Asteron froze for a moment, taken off guard. Why did his brother still care? How could he care after all Asteron had done?

His voice was bitter when he spoke at last. "No. I will never stand down! Ready your arms, soldiers!"

"This is outrageous! Think of what you're about to do, Asteron! I

beg of you! Please.”

Asteron raised his sword high. “ATTACK!”

The Great War of Shiitopia

The war raged on for weeks, good against evil. Asteron against Dilshad. A brother against a brother. From a distance, all anyone could see was blood and the occasional glint of a sword. All anyone could hear, close or far, was screaming, metal clanking, and vicious remarks. Asteron nearly destroyed every last soldier against him. Dilshad’s men were all dead or lying on the ground, unable to move. After two weeks of vengeful battle, only the brothers stood on the battlefield. Their clothes wet from sweat and blood. Both of them with a maniacal glint in his eyes.

Asteron raised his sword high and sprang at his little brother. Dilshad dodged, only barely, and slashed Asteron’s arm. They went on and on like this for hours. When the sun had set and the wounded had been taken away, Asteron lunged and held the slick blade against his fallen brother’s neck.

“You could never defeat me. I was always better at fighting than you, *brother*.” He spat the last word with hatred.

“I thought perhaps you would change, Asteron. I *hoped* you would change. Begged you to change. But you did not. Now, I doubt whether you ever will.” Dilshad replied, a tinge of remorse in his voice.

“So naïve, Dilshad. Our old life was boring. The people were boring. *You* were boring. I want to rule something. I want to change Shinzu for the better!”

“We could rule as one. The old days were peaceful, brother. There was no chaos, no sign that things would ever become chaotic—”

“That is your problem! You think everything is rainbows and butterflies. You cannot see past the happiness of the Shinzuans to see their problems! All you ever do is sit around and make light of things. Well, that’s all about to change, Dilshad. Forever.”

Without a moment’s hesitation, Asteron cut off his brother’s seemingly innocent head with a sickeningly clean *slice*!

“I’ve done it.” he whispered to himself. “I will rule my own kingdom at last.” He threw his sword in the air and bellowed a roaring laugh.

The breeze carried his voice past the humble homes in Shinzu. Past the wide-eyed men and women and their crying children. It

ventured to the Castle of Shinzu. Through each and every ally in the village. It echoed into a prince's ears...

Asteron suddenly choked on his crazed laughter and stumbled back. He looked down and saw a spear protruding from his stomach. Red liquid oozed from the wound as the would-be king fell to the ground.

A boy who could not have been even a teenager appeared in Asteron's sight. His eyes gleamed yellow as Dilshad's had. His face was streaked with tears. He leaned close to the dying man before him and whispered into his ear.

"Your own brother, Uncle. How could you?"

Asteron's eyes widened. "You... I..." His eyes rolled back in his head when the child yanked the spear from its resting place. Asteron heaved a last breath and fell beside his headless brother.

The Portals of Shiitopia

Alexander's grief lasted a long time. His rest was plagued with visions of his father's death. Visions of the spear that he'd used five years ago. Visions of what Asteron had done to his father. His mother only became more ill with every passing hour. The doctor said she would only last a week more. In four days, Alex was left orphaned. He was left with the responsibility of being king. He spent a year figuring things out and trying with every effort to unite Shiitopia once more. His father had told him many times that it was his greatest wish. Alexander intended to fulfill that desire.

"I promise to achieve your ultimate goal, Father. I promise." He whispered this to himself one day as he leaned over the rail of the castle bridge.

Even at eighteen years old, Alex often felt lost. He didn't really know what he was doing. The castle maids and butlers suggested things from time to time and offered their condolences, but it did not help. Alexander's closest confidant, Ole Pigair the walking talking pig with a cane, typically did nothing to help him either.

Alex studied for hours at a time in the castle library, hoping to find something useful about forging Shiitopia back together. He read about former kings and Forbidden Gems. Skimmed through stories about peace and what to do when chaos emerged. A few novels offered detailed suggestions on how to rule properly and without mayhem. For days and nights Alex did this, losing sleep over insignificant things.

He strolled outside now, leaning over the bridge and staring

into the darkness below him. The darkness that was Nihar. An idea began taking form in his mind as he looked on aimlessly. Alexander had read somewhere that the Forbidden Gems were hidden in the dungeons of a castle. It gave no specifics, but it was something. Perhaps there was a way to create portals that would lead to the Lost Lands.

Alex ran inside his castle and rushed into Pigair's living quarters. "Pigair! Pigair! I need your assistance with something!"

The old pig turned from the window he'd been facing and snorted. "What is it that requires my help?"

Alex took a breath and crossed his arms with a grin. "Remember how Father was always going on about uniting Shiitopia again?" A nod. "Well, I've been doing some research. The Forbidden Gems are hidden in the dungeons of a castle. If we can find them, we can use them to create portals to the other lands. What do you think?"

Ole Pigair leaned on his cane. "I think it's farfetched. But... farfetched may be exactly what we need. If you want my help, however, there is a condition."

Alexander raised a brow. "What might this condition be?"

"That girl you're always going on about, Diana? Daisy? Whoever she is, you should marry her. You've been together for two years now. Alexander, are you listening?"

"Yes, yes, of course. Her name's Darlene. It just hasn't seemed like the proper time yet, what with Mother and Father dying."

Pigair sighed. "Dilshad died six years ago and Sherley last year. You cannot live your entire life in mourning, Alex."

Alexander rolled his eyes. "Fine, I'll ask. Then we can get down to business. I only want to take two men with us if this works. My old sword master, Smithonson, and Wookiee."

"Get some rest, Your Highness. You'll need it for tomorrow."

Perhaps the Shinzuans would be greeted with a surprise someday soon. Perhaps their world would be united once more. Perhaps.

The Forbidden Gems of Shiitopia

Alexander and Ole Pigair began searching the next morning. Alex looked through his belongings for something of utmost importance. He needed the paper which his father had given him. The paper which had the magic words written on it. The words which would hopefully activate the Forbidden Gems.

"I found it! It's here, Pigair!" Alexander exclaimed, a wide grin on

his face.

Pigair toddled into the king's room and his eyes fell on the small white sheet of paper. "I'll take that. I can make sure it's safe. No offense, Your Majesty, but in your hands, it will surely never be found again."

Pigair reached for the paper, but Alex yanked it away. It wasn't hard to keep something from someone as short as Ole Pigair. He hardly came up to the king's elbow. Alex laughed as he read the three simple words aloud.

"Raziel-Raziel, creatus destruo. What does that mean?"

"It means Angel of Mysteries, create but destroy."

Alexander folded the paper and slid it in his boot. Then he turned to his friend and shrugged. "I suppose we should go find those gems."

Pigair noticed a twinkle in his king's eyes. He smirked. "Of course."

They searched in the library for the gems and found nothing. They looked in every bedroom and on each balcony. They came across only emptiness. They went from the three kitchens to each of the six dining halls. From the ballrooms to the courtyard. They searched for passageways and trapdoors. Secret halls or fake walls. They looked in the basement and came up empty handed. True to their name, these gems did indeed appear to be forbidden.

Back in the library, Alex was slumped in a chair with crossed arms. Pigair was staring out a window as he did when he was deep in thought. "At this rate, we'll never find those stupid jewels." The king complained, something he seemed fond of doing.

"What exactly did you read in that book?" the pig inquired.

"It said the gems were hidden deep under one of the castles. It never said specifically which one."

"Ahhh, now it makes sense. It's simply under *one* of the castles, which means it could also be hidden deep in Zuba. We must hurry if we want to make these portals before nightfall."

Alexander sighed. "All right. Let's go."

The king and his confidant left the library. They walked out the huge doors of the Castle of Shinzu. They strode down the bridge, entering the town of Shinzu. Alex saw glum faces and crying children. He knew he must help, but how, he hadn't a clue. They walked until they stood before a gaping pit. A pit that was Nihar. Alex stared for a moment before the reality settled in.

"How are we supposed to get across this blasted pit?" he angrily

yelled.

Pigair sighed. "You're eighteen, Alex. That means you can use magic. You need to concentrate on creating a bridge or something that will help us get across this pit."

Alexander closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He envisioned a wooden bridge spanning over the gap. The boards stretching from one side to the other. He felt a tingling sensation spread through his body, into his hands... Then it was gone. Pigair sneezed.

"Really?" Alex asked, facing him with a dull expression.

"My apologies. Please, continue." Pigair replied.

Alex sighed and shook his head before turning back to the task at hand. He raised his hands in front of him and focused. He felt the magic flow through his body. Then he felt it leave his body through the tips of his fingers. When his eyes opened, he saw a suspension bridge spanning across the pit. He turned to Ole Pigair with a grin on his face.

"Good work. But time's a wasting. Come, we must make haste."

The king and Pigair sprinted across the bridge, afraid it may dissipate. When they reached the other side, however, it was still there. Alexander's magic must've been more powerful than anyone suspected. They entered the castle's dark walls. Alex could almost feel the evil breathing in the darkness.

"Should we split up?" he questioned.

"I suppose we could cover more ground that way. I'll check the top floors. You go down and see what you can find." Pigair answered.

Alex nodded, already walking away in search of a staircase to the basement. He looked in the gloomy library, and through nearly every door. He found nothing until entering what appeared to be a run-down ballroom. The walls were covered with dust. The floor looked grimy and was splattered with who knew what. Cobwebs covered each corner and then some. Alexander thought it looked, well, disgusting. But he found in a corner the staircase to the basement, and he walked down it.

The walls were lit with spluttering torches every few feet. His footsteps echoed on the concrete ground and against the concrete walls. Even his breath echoed. Alex wondered if he was simply in some sort of echo chamber made for driving people mad. Or perhaps a place full of traps ready to kill him. More and more of these crazy ideas flitted through the king's head until he came to a sudden halt. He pushed open the door in front of him and stared wide eyed at the beauty before his eyes.

Four beautiful gems shone right in front of Alexander. A blue one, quite possibly bigger than his own head. There was a yellow one that flung golden patterns on the ceiling and walls. A small purple gem that would easily fit in Alexander's hand. Then an orange one that was perfectly shaped. These were the Forbidden Gems. Alex recalled their names from one of the books he'd read. Adira the Purple, Galina the Yellow, Abaddon the Orange, and Raziel-Raziel the Blue.

"Pigair! I found them! Come on!" Alex called.

Alexander heard footsteps above him, heard the clatter and clunk of a cane. Then Ole Pigair was standing beside him, staring at the magnificent gems.

"They are more wondrous than I could've imagined." He turned to the king. "Let's take them back to Shinzu. I sense a dark evil at work in this castle."

Alex nodded and scooped up the three smallest gems, leaving the huge blue one for Pigair to carry. They left the castle and gratefully inhaled the fresh air as they hastily walked down the bridge. Alex turned back just as he reached Shinzu and saw the bridge crumble. The boards fell into Nihar and were lost forever. The magic only lasted as long as they had needed it.

Alexander placed Raziel-Raziel the Blue on the ground of the castle courtyard. He placed the three smaller gems around it to form a sort of three-petaled flower. Then he turned to Pigair, who simply shrugged.

"You say the words." Alex instructed, handing the small paper to him.

Pigair cleared his throat and looked at the Forbidden Gems. "Raziel-Raziel, creatus destruo." Then, before their very eyes..... Nothing happened!

"I don't understand. Why didn't that work? It should've worked!" Alex exclaimed.

"Alexander, there is a simple solution. These gems were not created for just anyone to harness their power. It must be one who is worthy. It must be a king." Pigair stared deeply into the king's eyes. "It must be you."

Alex gaped at the pig. "How must it be me? I've only just learned how to use magic! That cannot be correct."

"It is correct, Your Highness. Only a king can be of enough worth to control such power."

Alex turned away from his friend and drew in a breath. He

sighed and closed his eyes. Almost instantly, he felt that warmth inside him. He felt the magic begging to be released. He placed a hand on the blue gem and whispered the words he'd memorized.

"Raziel-Raziel, creatus destruo."

He kept his hand in place and his eyes closed. He felt the warmth leave his body. Alexander felt the gem beneath his fingers break apart. He heard Pigair gasp and heard a faraway rumble. It was almost like thunder, but with a strange glass-clinking sound. After a time of silence, the king's eyes opened. He saw scorch marks in the courtyard where the gems had been, but he did not see the gems.

Alex spun in a circle until his eyes landed on Pigair. "What happened?"

Pigair only shook his head and pointed.

Shooting into seemingly nothingness, where three missing pieces of Shiitopia had once gaped, were three swirling vortexes. Alex stared at each white center. He noticed that each portal held blue, each held a part of Raziel-Raziel. One was purple and blue, one yellow and blue, and the last orange and blue. It was, really, a rather stunning sight.

"We really did it, Pigair. We made portals to the Lost Lands." Alexander breathed.

Pigair smirked. "It was all you, Alex."

The Shinzuans celebrated this wonderful news for many days. They saw their king as a hero. They rejoiced in their king's victory. They hoped and prayed that the vortexes would lead to the Lost Lands. Hoped everything would turn out well in the end. That their country would soon be whole. Unfortunately, these hopes were simply hopes, nothing more. Nothing at all.

The Lost Lands of Shiitopia

Of course, only a day passed before Alexander was reminded of Darlene. He found her in the Elves' Community Center one day and proposed to her. She accepted without hesitation. Their wedding, perhaps the biggest event ever to take place in Shinzu, was held at the castle. Smithonson, Alex's sword master, was to preach at the wedding. Pigair was the best man. Every Shinzuan attended their king's happiest day.

It was only the next day that preparations were finished. Alexander, Pigair, Smithonson, and Wookie were ready. They were to discover what was happening and return home safely. Darlene begged her husband to let her come, but Alex persuaded her to stay and

watch over their people. He only wanted to protect her.

When dawn arrived, they were waiting on Alex to leave. He had pulled Darlene to the side for a proper goodbye.

"Please, Alex, you must come back to me." Alex detected worry in her voice.

"You needn't worry. I'll always come back." he gave her an encouraging kiss and climbed in the magical boat with the others.

The boats had been crafted by Wookie himself. They were his "pride and joy." Each was large enough to hold four grown men. The wood was enchanted with a protection spell in case the vortexes tried to rip it apart. Which the occupants suspected as much.

The Shinzuans pushed the boat through the portal created by Adira the Purple. The ride was bumpy and uncomfortable. It would have been safe, except Alexander was stupid and came close to going overboard twice. It seemed like hours had passed before the boat stopped rocking from side to side. It landed itself on solid ground at last, for which the king was especially grateful.

"We have made it to the Lost Lands at last!" Wookie exclaimed. "Well, I suppose they aren't so lost anymore..."

"We have indeed, but I admit it is not what I expected." Alex mumbled.

This new land closely resembled the familiar Shinzu. The houses appeared to be a little more dilapidated. The castle had the same embellishments that Alexander's had, but it was smaller in scale. The people themselves all looked depressed and sullen. The most obvious difference between this new land and Shinzu, however, was the dark fog that hovered above the homes and the castle. The dreadfully evil blackness that nearly smothered everything.

"I fear this pressing darkness can mean only one thing. I'm afraid Nihar has returned after all." Ole Pigair said.

"But if that's true, how are we to go about defeating him? He is the most powerful being that ever existed! Our boy king destroyed the Forbidden Gems to make these portals! Those jewels were perhaps the only chance we had." Wookie complained.

Alex faced his followers. "I am going to ignore that insult, Wookie." He motioned toward the darkness. "Hope is never lost. It is only a matter of *finding* her. I promise you this: we *will* overcome Nihar. For the sake of Shiitopia, he must die. But first, my friends, comes the matter of figuring out exactly how he is running things around here. Then we must simply slay the evil. We have magic and we have swords. With surprise on our side, we can still win."

Smithonson, Pigair, and Wookie raised three fingers and saluted their king. Alex could not hide the grin on his face as he spun on his heel and continued on. They strode past child after woman after man. Past houses in shambles and homes that could only qualify as shacks. All the while they wondered if this land was under Nihar's rule, then how many others were? Could he possibly be in control of all the Lost Lands? The very thought was startling.

They kept going, until Alex was suddenly pulled away from the others. He yanked his arm from an old man's grip and turned to him. He appeared to be as crippled as a sadcatter. His silvery hair shot straight up atop his head. He waved a cane at Alexander, who was stunned into silence.

"You've got to help us. Please! I can see royalty written all over you and your rich clothes. This monster has claimed kingship of our country for seven long years. We are mere prisoners of our own land. You must help us! Free Shangzi and its people." his voice was rough and husky.

Alex cleared his throat and found his voice. "We'll do our best, sir. I need only know one thing. Is it true that Nihar is the ruler?"

"It is. For too long... Thank you, young man."

Alexander nodded at the man and hastily rejoined the others. The man's demeanor had seemed... reserved. As though someone was out to get him at all times. Perhaps these people only knew a life of fear. Perhaps they'd never felt anything except terror for these last seven years. It brought sadness and fear into Alex's heart to imagine what these people had gone through. To imagine a world where evil ruled.

Pigair broke the king's train of thought. "What, if I may ask, was that about?"

"Nothing, nothing at all." Alexander answered.

"We both know that isn't true, Alex."

"I... I'll tell you later. All right?"

Pigair eyed Alex suspiciously and shrugged, but Alex suspected the old pig knew more than he was letting on. As they neared the castle, he finally became tired of Ole Pigair's glances his way. He turned to Smithonson and Wookie with a sigh.

"Pigair and I need to speak in private. It shouldn't take long."

Alex pulled his friend away from the others and glared at him. "This old guy pulled me aside earlier. He asked if I would save his people from Nihar."

"What did you tell him?" the pig asked.

"That we would do our best to free the Shangzins." Alex's shoulders slumped. "Whether that's possible or not, I suppose we'll find out soon enough."

"Alex, listen." Pigair leaned on his cane. "I know that you're scared, and you probably should be. We do not need a leader who thinks he's too good for fear. Nobody is too good for fear. Remember that." He continued after Alex nodded. "You may not make it home to your wife. You may lose each of the men you brought with you today. Each of us fear the worst, but that will only strengthen us. Fear is only a weakness if you let it be. These men will give their lives for yours, Alexander."

Pigair left without another word, leaving Alex to lean heavily against the bridge. He drew in a weary breath and closed his eyes. He heard voices of men, women, and children. He heard the wind whistle through the leaves. He heard, above all, the very breath of darkness.

Alexander exhaled a sigh before returning to the others. He flashed a smile at them as he walked down the bridge to the castle gates. He thought it a bit suspicious that there was only a single guard, but when the main gate lifted it did not matter anymore. The entire world seemed to be at a standstill. The king's mouth hung open as he stared at the shadowy monster before him.

"I've been expecting you, Alexander."

Alex stumbled back when the sweetly poisonous words left the demon's mouth. The thing before him could only be described as grotesque. His black body was enveloped in shadow, but the general shape was there. The yellow eyes shone through the inky blackness. Alex knew who it resembled immediately. He knew he was staring into the face of his father. A shadow of his dead father.

He turned away and ran past Smithonson and the others. He ran past wide-eyed villagers and children at play. He ran as far as the portal and climbed into the boat. Then he hung his head with closed eyes and trembling hands.

He'd missed his father more than anything. He had been torn apart when he saw Dilshad's broken body lying on the ground. Now a creature was standing at the castle gate impersonating Alex's father. Impersonating one of the greatest kings there ever was. All Alexander could do was sit with trembling hands and gather his scattered thoughts. Gather the reality of what was happening.

The Shadows of Shiitopia

Alex stayed in that boat for what felt like days. After a time, he composed himself and climbed out. When he turned, Pigair was standing before him with a raised brow. Alex sighed and waited for the inevitable speech.

"Alex, I know this comes as a shock. Your father was a great king, perhaps the best. He died trying to protect you. He would have wanted you to try your absolute best to kill Nihar. To unite Shiitopia. This appearance Nihar has taken is simply an illusion. He is trying to get inside your head, and you're letting him. Please, remember what I told you before. Fear will only consume us if we allow it to. Alexander, you are a king. You are stronger than Nihar believes or will ever know. Use that to your advantage. Be wise. Have courage. Do not let fear control you."

Alex nodded and followed Ole Pigair across the bridge and to the castle gate. The monster was still there, waiting to see Alex's reaction. The king glared at Nihar and stood with crossed arms.

"I see you decided to return after all. Couldn't help yourself. Excellent." Nihar bellowed. "I knew you would come back. You could not resist the temptation to test me. To try me."

"I don't care for your manipulative ways, Nihar. We're going inside and we're talking. You answer my questions, and we'll leave." Alex replied.

Nihar laughed. "You, the boy king of Shinzu, making deals with me? Alex, you never make deals with darkness."

Alex shrugged. "I'm a king. I do as I please."

With that, Alexander walked past Nihar and into his castle. It became apparent that the castle was nearly exactly like that of Shinzu. The furniture was placed in the same areas. The magic orbs of light floated in the same locomotion. The decorations were the same. The only difference between the two castles were the size and the throne. Alex's own throne was gold and red, but Nihar's was green and a sort of rose gold.

Then Alexander turned to face the monster and what he saw stunned him. His companions, Smithonson and Wookie, were gagged and had their hands tied behind their backs. Smithonson, at least, looked like he had put up a good fight. Wookie was passed out beside him.

Alexander spun on his heel, face to face with Nihar. "I never should have trusted you or believed you. You're a monster. My men should not be held hostage. I have done nothing nor acted in any way that should provoke you. I came here to speak with you alone, and

that is all."

"If you came to speak with me alone, then why bring them along? Why put them in harm's way?"

"They are the best men Shinzu has. The best warriors. If there would be a fight, I'd want them fighting by my side."

Nihar clapped his hands mockingly. "Awfully good indeed. Come, let us speak privately, as you so wish."

Alexander cast a wary glance at Pigair before he turned to follow the shadow, but the pig grabbed his arm. Ole Pigair faced the king with a serious expression.

"Be careful, Alex. Nihar could end you with a snap of his fingers. He is a dangerous beast not to be trifled with. Don't do anything stupid."

"I won't, Pigair. I wouldn't risk endangering anyone else."

"ALEX!" Nihar called with impatience.

Pigair nodded glumly and released Alex, who reluctantly entered the dark room in which Dilshad's shadow awaited him. This single room was one that was not in the Castle of Shinzu. Everything was black and inky except the floating orbs of light. Alex turned to the monster before him and shut the door.

"Since we're finally alone, what is it you wanted to ask?" Nihar said.

"I want to know who you really are. We both know Nihar looks like a man, not a shadow." Alexander answered.

"I am simply part of my master. He split the darkness inside him in order to create us."

"How many of you are there?"

"I'm not stupid. Why would I provide you with such information?"

"It was worth a shot." Alex mumbled. "There is another thing as well. You need to let Shangzi's people go."

"Why would I do that? I need leverage."

"I don't care what you need or want. Shangzi should be a free people. I am here to return them to that status."

"You honestly think you can defeat me?" Nihar inquired.

"I suppose we'll have to find out."

"Alex, this is not a battle you will win. If you want information, let me first speak with your pig friend."

Was sending Pigair in a wise idea? Would Nihar, or his henchman, cause him harm? "I will allow you to speak with Pigair on one condition. When I return in five minutes, he must be unharmed.

You will not lay a finger on him. Do we have an agreement?"

"I believe we do."

Alexander nodded and exited the dark room. He found Ole Pigair silently staring through a castle window, as though he expected someone to appear there. Alex stood beside him and looked out the window.

"Pigair, I've made a deal with him." the king whispered.

The pig did not appear phased by this information. "And?"

"He wants to speak with you. He promised he would not harm you, and it's only for five minutes."

"What are you receiving in exchange for this?"

"Information."

Pigair spun to face his king. "And if that information is useless?"

Alex pursed his lips. "I believe it's worth the risk."

"You believe the information you *might* receive is more important than my life?"

Alexander sighed. "No, of course not. I just... I hoped you could give me long enough to free the others and attack. All you must do is stall while you wait, and scream if anything is suspicious. It may be our only option. I'm sorry."

"There is nothing to be sorry for. But please, don't take long."

"I'll go as quickly as I can." Alex turned from his friend and hastily walked to the others.

He pulled a dagger from his boot and cut the binds on their hands. Then he pulled off their gags. Smithonson stood and pulled up Wookie, who had opened his eyes at last. They both bowed to Alexander.

"There's no need for that. Please, stand." They straightened and nodded at Alex. "Pigair is in there alone. We must cautiously open the door and commence a surprise attack."

Smithonson's brow furrowed. "And if this does not succeed?"

"We will pray it does."

Alex unsheathed his sword and his men followed suit. They quietly strode to the door and carefully pushed it open. Alex rushed in first, but he halted almost instantly. Lying a few feet from the entrance was a spear sticking straight up. Alex's eyes drifted down the shaft and stopped on the still pig the tip was lodged in. His sword slipped from his hand and clattered to the floor. He dropped to his knees and closed his eyes.

"You see now why I needed a word with him." Nihar placed a

hand on Alex's shoulder.

"Your Majesty, we mustn't stay here. Let us go back to Shinzu and we'll regroup." Smithonson said, kneeling before his dismayed king.

"I'm supposed to decide where we must go and when we must leave. But now... I doubt whether I can make any decisions. I doubt whether I will ever make another decision." A single tear trailed down Alexander's cheek.

"Then I will decide for you, Alex." Smithonson pulled his king up and turned from Nihar, but the king did not follow.

Nihar gripped his arm and held a black blade against his back. He slowly raised the blade to Alex's throat, drawing a trickle of blood. "This boy will not be returning home. He is to come with me and serve my master. If you wish to leave this castle alive, I suggest you do it now."

Smithonson glanced at Wookie and exhaled a long breath. "I'm sorry, Alex."

They turned and ran toward the boat. When Smithonson glanced back, Nihar had vanished with Alex. He feared the Shinzuans would never see their king again. That his wife would never again kiss her husband.

The Pits of Shiitopia

The last thing Alexander recalled was seeing Pigair on the floor with a spear in his stomach. He barely remembered Nihar holding a sword to his throat. After that, everything had gone black.

He sat up now and saw nothing except blackness and seven floating orbs, but even with the light he could not see much. He was sitting on a bed that appeared to have been hastily shoved in the corner. It was the only white thing in the entire room. Everything else, walls, ceiling, and floor, was black. He imagined he must be in the Pits of Shiitopia.

That shadow of Dilshad had dragged his unconscious body into the deep, dark hole. He wondered if anyone would find him here. Were Smithonson and Wookie searching for him now? Did they even care?

Alex stood up and banged on the door. "I want to see Nihar! The real Nihar this time. When I get my hands on him—"

The door swung open. Standing before the king of Shinzu was Dilshad's shadow. Alex stared for a second too long. The demon gripped his arm tightly and yanked him down the hall. Alex

eventually got his feet under him and followed, all the while glaring at Nihar's back.



When Smithonson and Wookie returned to Shinzu without Alexander, the people sulked away and returned to their homes without hope. The streets cleared quickly, leaving the queen alone with tear-stained cheeks. Both men shook their heads glumly before she could ask.

"He's probably in the pits now. Nihar killed Pigair and threatened to kill us as well. We tried, but... I'm so sorry, Highness." Smithonson whispered.

"I know. I need some time. Please, we must prepare. We must rescue my husband. Smithonson, begin preparations. I'll find you soon."

"Of course, Madam. Anything." Smithonson pulled Wookie along and they soon vanished from sight.

Darlene wiped her eyes and sat on her bed. She dipped a quill in ink and wrote a letter with shaky hands. Her hope was that Alex would receive it if she threw it into Nihar and used magic. Perhaps it would be enough to locate him.

My dear love,
I'm sorry that you're down there alone. I have Smithonson and Wookie preparing a rescue. I want you to know that I love you and I always will. Please, Alex, stay out of trouble. Don't get yourself hurt. Please.

Love, your dear wife.

Darlene stood before the pit and watched the paper flutter down. She used magic on the letter, hoping it would find its way to Alex. Hoping he was not yet dead. Hoping with everything in her that her husband would be strong.



Alexander had known that Nihar appeared to be a man, but in reality, he was no such thing. He had not, however, been expecting to see a king. The thing that appeared to be a man sat in a throne of shadows before Alex. He was hairless but for a fanciful mustache that curled off his smug face. His eyes were black and devoid of emotion. His robes were white, red, and gold, flowing beneath his throne. His appearance was impressive, but Alexander knew better than to believe everything he saw.

Alex tried standing after his captor threw him to the floor, but

the shadow pushed him down. The king refused to bow before Nihar, even after he was pinned flat on the ground. He stared pointedly at the ceiling, refusing to look either monster directly in the eye.

"Release me. I have done nothing to deserve this." Alex said.

"You will bow to the master, or you will regret it!" Dilshad's shadow spat.

"Unhand the boy, Thesp." Nihar commanded.

Thesp reluctantly allowed Alexander to stand, but he stayed near to be sure the king wouldn't try anything. Alex glared at the mongrel before him as he spoke in a controlled tone.

"I refuse to set you free. Nothing you can do will persuade me otherwise. You, Nihar, are a demon. I do not bargain with such creatures, and I certainly do not let them run rampant."

"We shall see how long your defiance lasts. Our first session will begin tomorrow." Nihar leaned forward. "Chaszar!"

A shadow came running into the room. He looked similar to Alexander's father. He had the yellow eyes and same general shape, except his nose. Upon further inspection, Alex realized this version of Dilshad had a miniature nose.

"Sir." Chaszar said, standing stalk still before his master.

"Tie him up and lock him in the shadow room without light. Be sure to stand guard this time." Nihar sighed, as though giving orders tired him.

Chaszar bowed and spun to Alex, who obediently held his hands out. When the shadow came closer with the thick rope, Alex leaned over and whispered in his ear.

"Are you the reject?"

Chaszar tightened the rope and Alex flinched, but he had received enough of a confession. Then Alex shut his eyes and concentrated. Perhaps he could use magic to end everything. Perhaps he could destroy Nihar right now.

"Foolish child. Magic is useless here without my allowance. You cannot use magic on me when you're inside me." Nihar broke the king's focus.

"I will find a way, Nihar." Alex replied.

"A way to surpass my layered enchantments? Please, inform me when you do."

"I cannot inform someone who is dead."

"Gag the boy king's blabbering mouth too."

"Coward." Alex whispered that simple word just before he was gagged and dragged back to the dark room.

This time he could not see the bed or tell if there was any color at all. Darkness swelled in the chamber before his eyes. Thesp threw him, not too gently, into the room and slammed the door shut. His heart began to quicken when he heard the clicking of a lock and the receding clatter of footsteps on stone.



"We will need powerful magic in order to save our king." Smithonson explained.

His bedraggled army was gathered in the castle's courtyard. Many of them were women and only teenagers. Not even half of the twenty people were men, as many of Shinzu's best warriors had perished during the Great War. Smithonson himself and Wookie were two of those lucky enough to have survived.

"We can create an ever-growing rope that will lead us safely into Nihar. If that is unsuccessful, we will find a rope and enchant it." Darlene added.

"I can look for a backup rope, ma'am." Wookie volunteered.

"Good. Then are we in agreement?"

Smithonson's army nodded their heads solemnly and turned to leave. They would say goodbye to their families and pray they would return home. Smithonson feared that it would not be so. He feared each of the men and women would never return to Shinzu.

His hope was that the mission would commence in five days' time, but even then, Smithonson was afraid it may be too late. How long would Nihar torture Alex before simply killing him? Would the king even last one day of torture?

Darlene finished showing the others out and stood by Smithonson. "What if my husband does not return? What if Nihar does away with him and we're too late?"

"If that happens, our only option will be to defeat Nihar on our own and overcome the hopelessness that will try to pull us under." Smithonson replied.

"That does not sound encouraging, captain."

"Your Majesty, if it is the last thing I do, I will carry Alex to you in one piece. If he dies, I... I don't know what would happen. Shinzu would fall apart. I would fall apart."

"You know Alex that well, sir?" Wookie inquired.

"It's hard not to know someone after teaching them to wield a sword. When he was ten, I recall the first time he actually defeated me. By the time he was thirteen, he was a better swordsman than I was. I declared him ready two years later."

"But do you still know him that well?"

"Like a brother, my friend."

"I think rest will do us wonders." Darlene said after a time of quiet.

"Tomorrow, then."



Alexander lay on the bed for countless hours. He had only himself for company, only his thoughts. He imagined what the Shinzuans were doing. He realized, as he lay in the shadow room, that the Shinzuans were not just people. They were *his* people. They counted on their king to win this battle and end the reign of darkness. They looked up to him. Asked him for advice. Alexander was the king of Shinzu. It was only right that he started acting like it and defeated Nihar. It was only right that Alex did something for his people.

Although these thoughts renewed Alexander's strength, they did not renew his ability to stand when Nihar's henchmen appeared in the doorway. Thesp pulled him off the bed and shoved him against the wall. When he let go, Alex's weary legs gave way.

"Get up, boy!" Chaszar hissed.

Alexander raised his head and tried to speak, but he could not be understood with the gag in his mouth. Chaszar yanked it down, and Alex repeated himself. "I cannot. If you wanted me to walk out of here, perhaps starving me was not a wise decision."

Thesp grudgingly slung Alexander over his shoulder and they left the dark room, Alex's gag where it ought to be. They walked down the hall of dungeons until reaching the throne room. Thesp dropped Alex at Nihar's feet. Despite the tiredness in his eyes, Alex glared at the monster with hatred. He made no attempt to bow, and Nihar made no attempt to care.

"Thesp, remove Alex's gag." the master ordered.

When the cloth was removed, Alexander inhaled a deep breath and filled his lungs with fresh air. His mouth felt only a little dry, as Nihar had not meant to kill Alex in the dungeon. But his stomach begged for food other than rock solid bread and crumbs that he had not been able to consume.

"I expect your stay with darkness was not all that you hoped it would be?" Nihar raised a bushy brow in question.

"In all honesty, Nihar, it was not nearly as bad as I thought it would be. If you really expected me to break and abandon my kingdom so easily, you thought wrong. I treasure the safety and

peace of my people. I will not put them at risk." Alexander answered.

Nihar's brow slowly fell as he studied the king before him. It was unusual for someone to be so happy-go-lucky after spending five days alone in the dark. It drove most people insane. It broke most people. Why was Alex different?

Alexander, however, had anticipated Nihar's reaction. He knew he was expected to fold and give up, but he would not. He could not. It might've been simply the beginnings of his plan, but so long as he played his cards properly, everything would end well. When the time came, he would go all in.

Alex grinned at Nihar. "My situation is much better than yours. You see, I've received confidential information. You ought to make this place more secure."

"Do you think this is funny? You know nothing that I do not know!" Nihar replied.

"Ah, but I do. Soon, Nihar, soon."

"I will force it out of you, boy. Do not underestimate me."

"It's too late for that. I thought at this point you would have already killed me. We both know I'll never quit."

Before Nihar could reply, Alexander noticed a shadow approaching the throne room. The shape so resembled Dilshad, that he had to look twice before realizing it was simply another of Nihar's henchmen.

"What now, Torntuusk?" Nihar questioned.

"The security is improved, sir." Torntuusk replied with a slight bow.

"Of course. Leave us."

Alex watched the shadow disappear, sensing that something worse was to come. Nihar sent Thesp and Chaszar from the room as well and loomed over Alex. The king's grin melted off his face and only defiance remained.

"Stand up, Alexander."

Alex pushed himself up and faced Nihar. "Nothing will work."

"Is that what you believe?" Nihar asked as he forced Alex through a new door.

"Nothing."

"You'll soon learn otherwise."

The Beginnings of the Rescue

Only three days had passed for preparations. Smithonson and Wookie were loading four bags with the little supplies they planned

to bring, when Darlene requested an audience with Smithonson. Wookie assured his friend that he would finish packing the bags.

Smithonson walked past the humble homes. He walked past the people who were preparing. Then he paused on the bridge where his queen awaited him. He bowed to her and noticed the dismay in her eyes.

“Your Highness?” Smithonson whispered.

“I need things to be sped along. If we are in the pits tomorrow, I would be ever grateful. The longer this takes, the more pain Alex will be in. I expect to see him alive when we find him, captain. Please, Aldrich.”

“My men are doing things as efficiently as they can, Darlene. If things are quickened, we risk missing something of significant importance. I know you’re worried about Alex, we all are, but there’s only so much we can do to help him. I’m sure he has his own plan. You needn’t worry, Your Majesty.”

The queen of Shinzu nodded and sulked through the castle gate. Smithonson knew what she was likely going to do, and he wondered if she really believed it would work. Perhaps it calmed her nerves and helped keep her mind occupied. He often wondered if she actually believed Alex would send a letter to her. But how could he? Could it somehow be possible to send a message *up* Nihar? Smithonson shook his head and found his army.

“Men, our queen has ordered me to speed things up. But please, do not forget anything. Triple check each bag and each weapon before we leave.” Smithonson said. “I believe it is time we pull ourselves together and rescue our king!”

His army saluted him with three fingers, Shinzu’s sign of agreement and trust in a person. Even though things appeared to be dismal and perhaps hopeless, Alex’s people rejoiced. They rejoiced for him.



Alexander’s body was bruised everywhere. His lip was busted, and he could barely see through his right eye. Nihar had dragged him beyond that door for one purpose, and one alone. Only torture had awaited him in that room. Yet Alex had not given in. He had not broken or even cracked slightly. He was determined not to set Nihar free. Determined to keep Darlene’s message a secret. Determined to free the people of Shiitopia.

As Alex lay on the bed in his dark room, he thought only of his wife’s letter. If they were going to attempt a rescue, should he stop

his plans? Would finishing his plan put Smithonson and the others in danger? A knocking at the door jarred him to reality. Chaszar came in and looked Alex over with disgust.

"Nihar commands you to reconsider this foolishness. Next time someone comes in here, it will only be for more pain. This will end if you only tell Nihar what he wants and set him free."

Alex winced as he sat up, feeling a sharp pain thump in his chest. "All right, I suppose chillaxing never hurt anyone."

"You should not be relaxing. You are to rethink your stupidity."

"You're honestly just going to let that monster use you as a pawn? I'm certainly not. Never plan to."

Alexander lay down once more as the door shut, but he caught Chaszar's whisper. "Such a disgraceful boy."



Smithonson stood before the Pits of Shiitopia with Wookie and Darlene at his sides. He faced his army and recognized fear upon their faces. Five days preparing everything and readying themselves, yet they still were uncertain whether it was a wise idea. Each person's face reflected the fear he'd seen on Alex's face many times before, but he also saw determination there. Hiding behind fear was always a sense of power, of readiness.

"It is time. We must rescue our dear king before his time runs out. Alexander knows we are coming and is likely expecting us soon." he conveniently left out the fact that Alex may be dead. "I know that no amount of preparation could prepare us for what is to come, but I also know that we are a strong people. We have magic on our side. We have blades on our side. Even so, some of us may be wounded. Some of us may die. You are welcome to leave, we will not hold it against you." Nobody left. Smithonson smiled. "Alex will be happy to see you all, assuming we make it that far. I thank you for risking everything for your king. I thank you for risking your lives in order to free the people of Shiitopia!"

The army cheered as they fastened the rope securely around a tree. They believed their captain would lead them true. They believed in Alexander. They knew that whatever happened, the whole crew, or the one man who survived, would save their king and return him home.

"Aldrich, it is time." Darlene said.

He watched the rope fall into seemingly nothingness before turning to his army once more. "Descend carefully and watch for others. When and if we reach the bottom, do not fret. I have an idea

in mind of how to locate Alex."

They descended into Nihar, and everything went deathly quiet. Smithonson saw Wookie above him, but he heard nothing. He scarcely heard his own breathing. After a time that felt like hours, ground had been touched. Smithonson heard his people cheer once more as he pulled Wookie aside.

"Who is going to lead us to Alex?" Wookie questioned.

"Me, of course. I wasn't appointed captain for nothing." Smithonson replied.

"How will you go about doing that?"

"Locating magic, Wookie. I did not bring you here to question my methods. We must discuss our next move."

"I do not wish to die! Saving the king of Shinzu may be important, yes, but risking our lives for a single boy? I should never have agreed to this!"

"Keep your voice down. People should not hear you disgrace their king like that." Smithonson glared at Wookie. "Many others and I chose to make sacrifices. We are more than willing to risk our lives if it means saving Alex. If it means freeing our people from Nihar. I hope I can expect the same of you, Wookie."

Wookie left Smithonson without any means of response. Aldrich watched Darlene chase after him. He focused on creating a magic laser that would, in theory, lead them to Alexander. When he had finished it, the white light shot into the distance without end. He beckoned his army to follow him, all of them praying it would prove useful and take them to their king.

As they marched forth, Darlene appeared by Smithonson's side. "I know you will lead us to my husband, captain. Alex will be in good hands as long as you're around. As soon as he is safe." She whispered.

"I appreciate your honesty and trust, Milady, but I cannot promise anything."

With that, they continued on in silence. Continued toward the hope that Alex would be waiting for them when the light came to a stop.



Alexander was pulled from his room and forced into the throne room once more. Thesp, as was typical, pushed him to the ground before Nihar's throne. Alex knelt in a mocking way that he knew would provoke the mongrel. Then he grinned and stood.

"Have you reconsidered telling me what I want to know? Or decided to set me free?" Nihar inquired with his venomously honeyed

voice.

"Of course not. As I've told you many times already, nothing you do will cause me to tell you anything. And I do not believe that you're holding my people hostage. If you really were, however, I would gladly change my mind." Alex answered smugly.

"Then I suppose you'll be needing proof that I have imprisoned your captain. I believe his name is Aldrich Smithonson. You see, 'your dear wife' was kind enough to have written you a letter. A letter which you did not very well keep hidden."

Alexander closed his eyes for a brief moment before composing himself. "Then you know that they're on their way. You've known since I've known. That's how you knew to tell Torntuusk to up the security. It seems I should not have been so confident."

"Things do appear to look grim for you, Alex. You have no information left for leverage. The *only* reason you are still breathing is because you're the only one who can set me free. You are, after all, the king of Shinzu. If you die during torture, it's no big deal. There will be someone else willing to serve me. There will always be another king." Nihar leaned forward in his throne with clasped hands. "I will offer you a choice. Give me what I want, and you will be free to go. Set me free and your people will be safe. I will not lay a finger on your precious Shinzuans."

"What of the others? I care for each and every Shiitopian, Nihar. For as long as I live, it will be my life's goal to keep you imprisoned."

"Perhaps your life will not last much longer."

"Then my people will defeat you. Smithonson will defeat you. I. Will never. Set you. Free." Alex leaned closer to Nihar. "Never."

"Torntuusk, drag the wretch back to the dungeon."

Alex was pulled down the hall by Torntuusk, Thesp and Chaszar following close behind. They paused at the entrance to his room, but they did not open it. They shoved Alexander against the wall and took turns hitting him. They punched him where he suspected a rib was already broken. When they finished, he was gasping for air and barely conscious. Every breath only brought more pain. When they placed him on the bed, he lay still.

Alex closed his eyes, hoping to somehow sleep through the agony, but he could not. It seemed Nihar was unwilling to allow him any amount of rest. He lay with closed eyes until he heard the familiar unlocking of his door. Alex's eyes shot open, and he turned his head to see Nihar, then he looked away once more.

"I've nothing to say to you." Alexander breathed.

"I'm here to help you." Nihar whispered.

"When have you ever helped anyone? Why should I believe anything that spews from your poisonous lips?"

"Alex, you are doing this to yourself. I'm warning you that what happens next will be a thousand times worse than anything you've yet experienced. If you agree to set me free, there will be less pain. I will heal you."

Alex grimaced as he turned to face the monster. "I will never let a beast like you free of captivity. I will never let pain or fear force me to make irrational decisions. I will never, *never*, be swayed by your words that drip acid."

"Then remember these words and remember them well. You are the only person who can end this torture."

Alex was yanked to his feet and carried to a new dungeon room. One with chains that hung from the ceiling. Alexander's hands were untied, and he was chained to the ceiling, barely able to touch the ground beneath him. He knew what was soon to come as the shadows sliced his shirt away.

The Beginning of the End

Smithonson led his army through the thick darkness that was Nihar. Their marching steps echoed from wall to wall. The white beam never appeared to cease its infinite stretch. They did not pause, and they did not complain. They knew Alex needed them.

After a long while of marching forth, the laser began to shorten at last. In the distance, they saw light that grew brighter and brighter. Smithonson wondered if this was simply more annoying orbs or if Alex might actually be ahead. As they drew nearer, he heard voices. Voices that spoke loudly and with authority. They were soldiers' voices.

Aldrich pulled his army aside and spoke in a whisper. "There's a building ahead. I suspect thirty men are waiting for us. I'll take Wookie and eight others. We'll regroup when I return."

Wookie gathered eight men and they followed Smithonson with raised swords. The remaining army saw shadows and glinting blades. They heard gurgled screams and sickening slashes. After a time, Smithonson returned with Wookie and the other eight. Aldrich ordered the three injured to sit and rest before finding his queen.

"There were twenty-two and they were well informed. I suspect someone knew of our arrival." he paused before asking the question. "We both know only one person could have known. Is it possible that

Alex surrendered and told Nihar everything?"

Darlene's face paled. "No, captain. It is not." She turned away and left Aldrich to lead alone.

Smithonson led them into the building where they had killed the guards, hoping there would not be more inside.



"You cannot survive this forever, Alex. Give up and save what little dignity you still have. Bow before me and set me free." Nihar spat.

Alexander's back was aflame in pain. He screamed when the whip flew once more, its claw ripping deeper into his back. Thesp let it fly twice more before Alex's legs gave way at last. The chains pulled hard on his shoulders, but he only moaned. There was no more strength for screaming, for fighting the inevitable. Before the whip flew again, he made a decision.

"Nihar, wait." Alex's next words were bitter in his mouth and left him with a feeling of guilt. "I will do as you wish. Please, unchain me."

Nihar forced Alex to look him in the eyes. "I will decide when to unchain you."

"I will offer only once. After this, I will die before letting you free."

Nihar took the whip from Thesp and sent his henchmen from the room. When the chains came apart, Alex collapsed to the ground. Nihar knelt beside him and hissed in his ear.

"My shadows are not the only ones who torture, Alex. Someone had to teach them." Alex felt the whip slide threateningly down his spine. "I have your captain in my dungeons. It will be your fault if he dies because of your foolishness. When you're ready, I'll be in my throne."

Alex's eyes closed. "I think you mean *if* I'm ready."

Nihar slapped the king and threw the whip to the floor. "I will not tolerate your disrespect, Alexander. Do not keep me waiting."

The demon left Alex lying on the floor of a dungeon. He left Alexander with a whip. Nihar left the king of Shinzu alone with a sword not so far away.



As the door creaked open, Smithonson saw only an army twice the size of his own. He carefully shut the door before the men noticed him and ushered his soldiers away. Aldrich took Darlene and

Wookie aside once more and explained the situation.

"They are here for a reason. I had hoped the building would be empty, but I suppose that was only wishful thinking on my part. I do, however, believe they are guarding our king." Smithonson said.

"Then let us go in and attack." Wookie suggested.

"Absolutely not! If Nihar has Alex in there, he will kill him before we've disposed of all those guards." Darlene countered.

"No one else is offering a better plan."

"Any idea is better than yours!"

"That is enough." Smithonson was disgusted with their arguing. "I have a simple solution. Listen, and please refrain yourselves from interrupting. I will give myself up. They'll take me to Alex and you guys can attack. This time you will have surprise on your side, and you might stand a chance. If worse comes to worst, I am willing to risk my life for the sake of our king's."

"Why can someone else not do it? Why does it have to be you? Why can Wookie not do it?" Darlene inquired.

"I must do it because I will not put anyone else in harm's way. They will take me to Alexander, and I'll bring him back to Shinzu. Once they take me, there will be fewer soldiers for this army to kill. As for Wookie, he is not yet prepared to risk his life for our king's. If I send him in, we will all be killed or held hostage long before he ever returns with Alex."

Darlene glared at Wookie. His only response was a hung head and eyes shadowed by shame. The queen sent him away and spoke to Aldrich. "I suppose you are correct. Be careful. Please, bring my husband to me alive and in one piece."

"Always, Your Highness."

Smithonson steeled himself as he neared the black building once more. The second he opened the door, every head turned toward him with drawn swords. A few sheathed them and went back to drinking and acting rather immature. Ten armed men, however, stood before Smithonson and glared at him with permanent scowls etched on their faces.

"Who do you think you are, coming here like this?" one of them inquired.

"I am Aldrich Smithonson, captain of King Alexander's army. I'm here to surrender."

The soldiers smiled at one another and turned away from Smithonson. He leaned closer in an effort to hear what they were discussing, but he caught nothing except sniggering. They faced him

once more with serious expressions and held up a rope.

"We expected you would show up some time soon. That boy king Nihar imprisoned had a letter that told us all about you and your army. Luckily, you actually turned up. He may have been killed if you never showed."

Two men restrained Aldrich while the others bound his hands. There were ten escorts as they led him from the black building and from his army. They led him farther and farther into darkness. Closer and closer to Nihar's castle.



Alexander still lay on the ground of the whipping dungeon. Every inch of his body felt the pain of the strap. He felt the burn on his bare back. Alex felt the blood drip upon the ground. After a time, he pushed himself up and placed a hand on the smooth wall for support. He had barely made it out of the cell when Torntuusk appeared in front of him.

"Nihar wants to see you. Now. You have waited long enough." The monster grabbed Alexander's elbow and pulled him quickly to the throne room.

Alex stumbled when Torntuusk released him, hardly able to hold his own weight. When he was steady again, he spoke before Nihar had even opened his mouth.

"You said you would heal me. That was the deal." Alex's voice was quiet.

"If you set me free, I will stand by that promise. If you refuse to do so, I will have no choice but to kill you." Nihar replied.

"I cannot set you free in my current state. I can hardly stay on my feet in my current state."

Nihar rose from his throne and put a cold hand against Alexander's back. The king felt the wounds close, felt the blood cease to flow. When Nihar removed his hand, it was only a harsh soreness that Alex felt.

"I expect complete cooperation, Alex. Set me free or face the consequences." Nihar whispered.

Alex nodded and closed his eyes. He focused on the magic inside him until he felt the familiar warmth flow through his veins, but he did not raise his hands to use it. He could not allow Nihar freedom. His duty would always be to his people. To the people of Shinzu and Shiitopia as a whole. His duty was to free Shiitopia from Nihar, not to release Nihar into Shiitopia.

Alexander opened his eyes and sighed. "I must be alone with the

thing I'm using magic on. Your henchmen must leave."

"Chaszar, Torntuusk, and Thesp, you may leave." Nihar turned to his prisoner. "If you do one thing that could threaten me, I will not hesitate to get the whip."

"I understand."

He shut his eyes once more as he concentrated on the warmth. He focused on using the magic for good. Using it for his own purpose, not for Nihar's purpose. Alex exhaled slowly and snapped his fingers. In that instant, Nihar's henchmen vanished into thin air. The shadows dispersed and left the room bright. When his eyes opened, Alexander saw Nihar's rage.

The monster before him raised a sword. "You dare defy me? I let you use magic, and this is how you repay me? Alexander, you are a hopeless cause. Always were."

Alex grinned and unsheathed the sword he had hidden there. "You were wrong, Nihar. Whatever chains you try to place on me, I will always, *always*, rise from them. I'm not buying my freedom, because you never owned it. But I am taking it back, for me, and for my country."

The Final Step

Smithonson lay on the bed of his cell, anger bubbling in his chest. He heard the guards by his cell door talk about Alex. They spoke of him being whipped. Was he still alive? Could the king of Shinzu be dead?

Aldrich thought these things over several times, slowly drifting to sleep. When the demons outside his door ceased to speak, however, he was wide awake. He carefully walked to the door and pressed his ear against the cold metal. He heard only silence and distant speaking. Then metal clanking on concrete. Smithonson heard keys fall to the ground.

Aldrich sat on the bed and struggled to untie his bonds. After a time, he was certain untying them was an impossibility. He resorted to scraping the rope against the floor of his cell. He sat on the concrete rubbing the rope until he scraped his wrist. Smithonson maneuvered his hands from the bonds and tried opening the door without keys simply to see what would happen. To his stunned surprise, the metal door opened into a hall of dungeons. He cautiously walked out and began searching each cell for prisoners.

Smithonson found no sign that Alex had ever been held in a cell. Each door he opened was empty. Each room he came across was

silent. He suspected one of the voices he'd heard belonged to his king. Aldrich stood by his cell and listened. He followed the voices he heard until, at last, he found the throne room. Smithonson peered around the corner and saw his king.

Alexander was pale and Nihar's hand was on his back. Aldrich looked closer and saw where the whip had torn into his king's back. Nihar seemed to be healing it though. Smithonson shook his head in confusion. When Alex raised a sword to Nihar's, Aldrich froze. He could only watch.



"It is time this madness ends, Nihar." Alexander whispered.

He charged the demon before him, but Nihar was better than he had anticipated. He blocked Alex's sword, but the king continued to slash and stab. Continued to hit metal against metal. Eventually, though, one of them would surely make a mistake. One of them would become weary.

Alex imagined returning to his people with good news. His people wanted him to win. His wife believed he would return. Alexander smiled and fought harder for the people of Shinzu. For his people.

They fought for what seemed an endless number of minutes. Alex's shoulders had been weak after being whipped and after a time it became difficult for him to hold up the sword. His back ached from moving back and forth and dodging. Alex ran at Nihar, but the demon sensed it coming. He twisted the king's sword from his weak grip and pushed him against the wall. Nihar held a blade to Alexander's throat.

"Surrender now, Alex. This was never a fight you could win." the demon spat.

"I refuse to give up until I see that Smithonson is free. Only then will I set you free." Alex replied.

"Fine. It is only you I wish to keep in captivity."

"Then let me see that my captain is free, and I will give up."

Nihar smiled a disturbing smile as he pushed Alexander down the hall of dungeons at sword point. They passed cell after cell until pausing before an empty room. Alex saw the severed rope lying on the ground and he grinned inwardly. Aldrich had escaped after all.

"There. He's gone."

"Now I will do as you so wish."

They went into a dungeon and Nihar shut the door. Alexander was shoved against the wall, something these demons seemed fond

of doing. Nihar grabbed his wrist and held it tightly. "I suggest you get to it before I lose my patience."

"You're right, of course. Except, I would not do that if I were you." Alex said, staring at the hand Nihar teasingly rubbed the blade against.

The mongrel raised a brow. "Do what?"

"I cannot concentrate if I'm in pain."

Nihar slid the blade across Alex's hand. Alex let out a cry of pain as he felt the sword cut his flesh. He yanked his hand away and gripped it to slow the bleeding. His hand shook terribly as he glared at Nihar.

"You did this to yourself."

Alexander closed his eyes and focused on the magic. He focused on killing the monster before him. Alex concentrated on anything except his hand. When he felt the cool blade touch his other hand, he sighed and tried to find the warmth.



Smithonson had long since abandoned the Castle of Shangzi, believing Alex had everything under control. He found his army at the black building. Aldrich saw as many of his men lying dead as there were of Nihar's men. He saw Darlene speaking with seven others, people Smithonson did not personally know. Thirteen of the twenty men he'd led into Nihar's darkness were dead.

Darlene appeared by his side and simply pointed to a jacket that covered one of the fallen. Aldrich lifted the cover and fell to his knees. Wookie's complexion was pale and deathly. His eyes were closed. His limp hand still grasped his sword. Smithonson looked him over and noticed the smile upon his face. Wookie had died a hero. Aldrich covered his friend once more and turned to Darlene.

"He told me he was unwilling to risk his life for Alex's. Look where that got him. He's dead, yet he is happy." Smithonson whispered somberly.

"He fought well, captain." Darlene replied.

"I should have been fighting by his side."

"No, Aldrich. You should have been where you were most needed. Alex needed you most. Had you been here, our king would have perished."

"For all I know, Alexander is dead."

"What are you talking about?"

"I left him with Nihar. I thought he could handle himself. I should not have been so foolish."

Darlene's eyes grew wide as she took a step back. Smithonson watched her collapse to her knees and saw her tears flow freely. The Shinzuans left alive gathered around their queen and tried to console her. When Aldrich heard her sobs, his guilty conscience took over. He must get Alex to safety. He must save his king. His student. Smithonson departed his small army and headed back to the cursed castle.



Alexander felt the warmth grow as he focused on his magic. He wanted to free Nihar from the burden deemed life. Free him from the world. From Shiitopia. His eyes opened after a time of concentration, and he spoke in a soft voice.

"I am ready. The time has come."

"Then what is it that you're waiting for?" Nihar asked, holding his sword against Alex's uninjured hand.

"You are not prepared for my magic, Nihar. There could be consequences."

"Explain."

"It could kill you or reduce you to ashes. If, however, you are lucky, you might vanish without the agony." Alex replied with a slight smile.

Nihar's patience was lost at that moment. He dropped his weapon and lifted the whip from the ground. Alex's eyes grew wide, and a scream burst from his lips when the strap flew. He felt it rip open the sealed wounds and he collapsed to the ground. Nihar let it fly five times more before kneeling at Alex's side.

"Now, Alex. Do it now."

With what little strength Alex had left, he raised a hand and snapped. Had the king lifted his head, he would have seen Nihar begin to vanish. He would have seen the demon reach out a cold hand and attempt to grasp his arm. Alex might have been intrigued to see Nihar disappear forever. Alexander did not, however, move until he heard the demon's sword clatter to the ground beside him.

Alex slowly pushed himself to his feet and leaned against the wall. There would be no more pain or torture. No more shadowy henchmen. The king of Shinzu was free. Free to go home to his people.

Alexander stumbled through the castle gate. His eyes fluttered as he walked down the bridge, a hand on the rail for stability. He saw Smithonson a distance off, then he collapsed to his knees. Alex's vision became blurred and dull.

"Alex! You're safe!" It was not until Aldrich reached his king that he saw the extent of his injuries. He noticed Alex was not wearing a shirt. When he supported Alexander's weight, he saw what the whip had done. "My king, I should have come sooner. Forgive me."

Alex lifted his head and tried for a smile. His voice was quiet when he spoke. "It was not your fault, Aldrich." He took a deep breath and winced before continuing. "Please, tell me if my people are safe."

"Thirteen are dead, Wookiee included. Darlene and the other seven are alive and safe."

"Thank you, Aldrich." Alex barely heard himself speak those words before he slumped in his teacher's embrace.

Smithonson lifted Alexander into his arms and carried him away from the castle. He walked farther into the darkness until the black building came into view. Aldrich laid Alex on the ground and shook him, but it did not work. He shook his king harder, but still it was unsuccessful. Smithonson placed his hand on Alex's forehead and warmed his cold skin with magic. Alexander lay still, then sat up after a time with open eyes.

"Your people are just ahead, Alex." Aldrich whispered.

Alex smiled and struggled to stand. "Take me to them, please."

Smithonson obliged and helped his king walk to his people. They cheered when Alexander appeared before them and saluted him with three fingers. Smithonson brought him to his wife's side and left them alone for a bit of privacy. Darlene's eyes met her husband's and she fell into him.

Alex winced, but he did not pull away. "I missed you, dearest." he whispered.

"I thought you were gone, Alex. I thought I would never again see you. Are you hurt?" Darlene replied, glancing at his dripping fingers and her own bloodied hands.

Alexander pulled away this time and kissed his wife. "It's nothing serious. I'll be fine after peace and rest."

"What about Nihar?"

"I'll tell you later."

With a last kiss, Alex hobbled over to Smithonson and grinned. "Thank you, Aldrich. The rescue party, the rope, coming to find me. I would not have expected so much."

"Anything for our beloved king. You should thank yourself for freeing Shiitopia."

"Gather the people round and we'll return home at last."

Aldrich caught Alex before he toppled over. "Perhaps you need assistance with climbing the rope."

Alexander sighed in relief. "Yes, please."

As the Shinzuans ascended one at a time, Smithonson stayed with Alex at the bottom. When Darlene disappeared over the edge, Alexander leaned heavily against the wall. Aldrich appeared beside him.

"We're the last ones, Alex. I mean no disrespect, but you look terrible. You are in no condition to climb that rope by yourself." Smithonson said, already helping his king to the rope.

"I know, but I will not ask you to carry me."

"You don't have to."

Aldrich knelt before his king and let Alexander climb on his back. Smithonson gripped the rope with both hands after checking that Alex was secure, then he climbed the rope to Shinzu. Aldrich reached the top and lifted Alex on his shoulders. The Shinzuans cheered and rejoiced and threw flowers upon their king. Alexander smiled with them, and they cheered all the louder.

Aldrich carried him as far as the castle gate before Alex slid from his shoulders. Smithonson bowed and turned to leave, but Alex placed a hand on his shoulder and looked him in the eye.

"I believe it's time I gave you something you well deserve, Aldrich." Alex's voice was soft. He pointed to Zuba and smiled tiredly at his teacher.

"You think I should rule my own kingdom." Aldrich whispered.

"I know you should. A king for Zuba is long overdue and there is no better man than you for the throne."

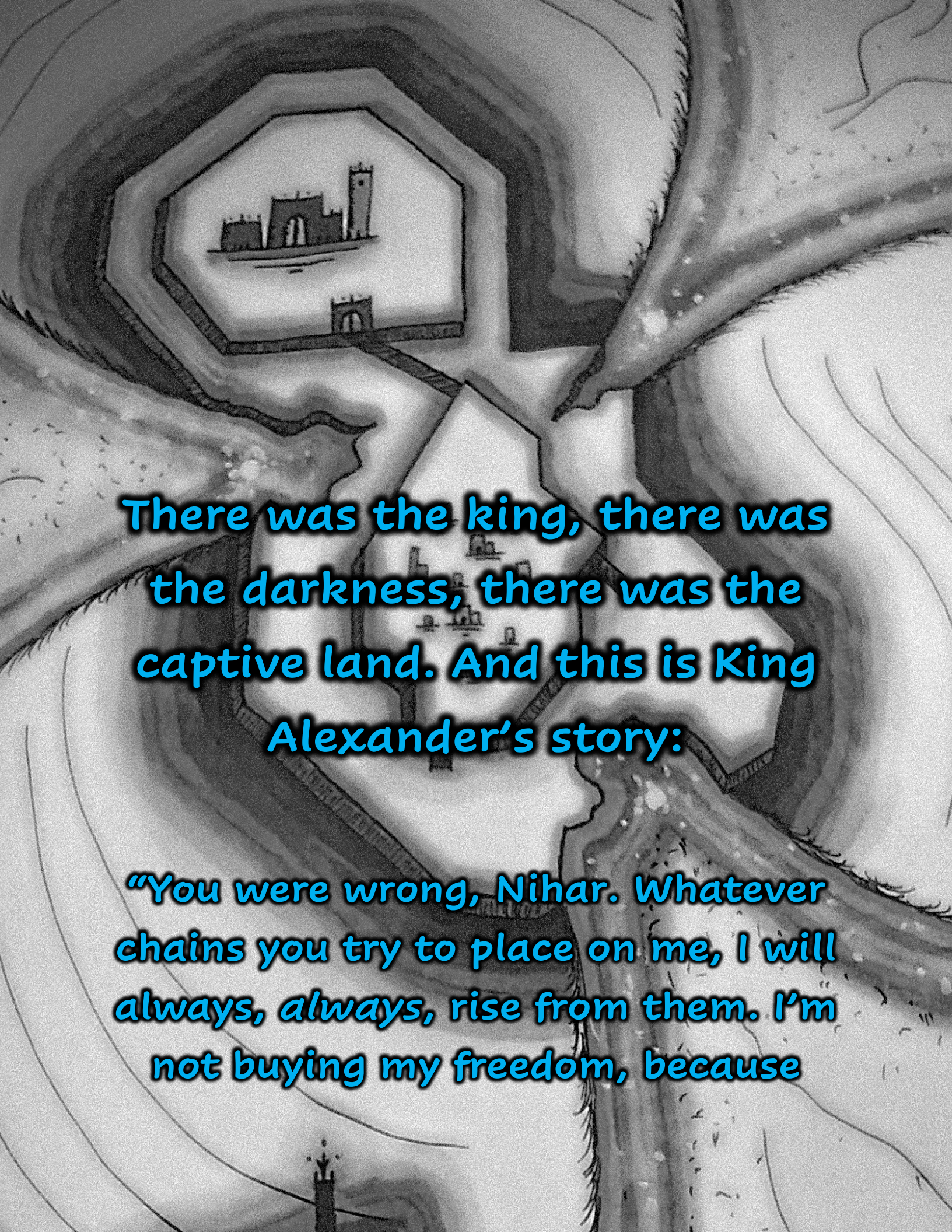
"Alex, I don't know what to say."

"You do not have to say anything, except perhaps goodnight."

Smithonson grinned and bowed once more, leaving Queen Darlene and King Alexander to rest in their castle.

Alex was finally home. His people were safe. Nihar was gone for good. His people cheered for him as they watched their king enter his castle. They cheered for a new beginning. A new world. The Shiitopians saluted three fingers to a free world. To a free country.

The End

A black and white illustration of a face, possibly a king, with a cityscape inside the eye. The city features a large building with a tower and a bridge. The face is looking down, and the city is visible through the eye socket.

There was the king, there was
the darkness, there was the
captive land. And this is King
Alexander's story:

"You were wrong, Nihar. Whatever
chains you try to place on me, I will
always, *always*, rise from them. I'm
not buying my freedom, because

**you never owned it. But I am taking
it back, for me, and for my
country.”**